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WOONSOCKET'S BERNON WORSTED MILL LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER

A Woonsocket textile mill built in 1919 has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and industry. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Bernon Worsted Mill to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Built to house a custom spinner of fine worsted yarns, the Bernon Worsted Mill is a significant element of the architectural and historical development of the woolen industry in Woonsocket.

The Bernon Worsted Mill at 828 Park Avenue in Woonsocket was constructed in 1919. Two stories in height, the flat-roofed brick building measures approximately 290 feet by 80 feet. It is an example of an "industrial loft," a specialized type of building often used for textile manufacturing, consisting of two or more stories in a long, narrow configuration. This shape was originally developed to satisfy the needs for interior light and power transmission via line-shafting. At Bernon Worsted, the stairs are located at the ends of the building, and a freight elevator is located at the front corner of the building, to minimize intrusion into the workspace. Regular, segmental-arched and rectangular window openings line three sides of the mill.

As an industrial loft building, Bernon features fire resistive, or “slow-burning” construction, with heavy, self-supporting masonry outer walls. The interior framing system consists of widely-spaced, heavy timber, cast iron, or steel posts, and thick, tongue-and-groove, wood plank floors, providing limited surfaces for fire to take. The complex also includes an original, one-story, brick boiler room and chimney.

The founder of the Bernon Worsted Mills was Charles Augustus Proulx (1872-1931), a descendant of Woonsocket’s first French-Canadian settler. In 1905, Proulx established the Woonsocket Dyeing and Bleaching Company and later the Fairmount Dye Works. In 1919, Proulx and partner Lawrence A. Jarret raised \$500,000 to develop the Bernon Worsted Mills. Proulx served as the president; Jarret held the positions of treasurer, secretary, and buyer; and in 1923, Ernest Barnes was the superintendent of the operation.

Bernon Worsted Mill was sited in a sparsely developed section of Woonsocket. Because the large, open parcel was accessible to major thoroughfares in a growing residential neighborhood, it offered the promise of expansion space, ease of transportation, and an accessible workforce. Unlike many of the massive woolen mills in Woonsocket, Bernon Worsted Mill was physically smaller, operated fewer, more technologically sophisticated machines, and produced smaller batches of more varied types of custom yarns. The firm employed 175 people in 1923, and 200 in 1929.

Succeeding Proulx in 1931, Lawrence Jarret ran Bernon Worsted Mill for five years and sold it to Yorkshire Worsted Mills of Philadelphia in 1936. Though it employed approximately 350 people at its height of operation, Yorkshire closed the mill in 1939. The mill changed hands twice in 1941, and was eventually acquired by Airedale Worsted Mills. Airedale co-owner Joseph Axelrod was an extremely successful, self-made entrepreneur whose family had majority ownership of six textile mills in Woonsocket, Pawtucket, Providence, and New Bedford. As textile industries migrated from the northeast to the southern United States in the 1950s, Axelrod’s textile empire began to unravel.

The Airedale Worsted Mill continued to operate at the Park Avenue building until 1956, when it consolidated its operations and moved the Woonsocket equipment to Clinton, Massachusetts.

In 1957, the vacant building was purchased by Dauray Textiles. Founded in Woonsocket, Dauray processed novelty yarns with natural and synthetic fibers. Twenty years later, Dauray sold the mill to Crimptex, Incorporated, a producer of broadwoven fabrics. When Crimptex relocated in 1998, the mill was sold to MBG Realty, Company, LLC, a subsidiary of Achim Importing, of New York City. Achim is said to have used the space for the production of curtains and drapes. The current owner, Nadeau Corporation, purchased the mill in 2004 to convert into residences under the name “Red Mill Lofts.”

The National Register nomination for the Bernon Worsted Mills was prepared by Virginia Adams, Matthew Kierstead, Jeffrey Emidy, and Illeana Matos of PAL. According to Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the RIHPHC, “Rhode Island was a national leader in manufacturing worsted fabrics, and factories in Woonsocket like Bernon Mill were important producers. Preserving Bernon Mill honors French-Canadian mill workers and owners, while the rehabilitation of this historic building will create twenty new apartments and add new vitality to the neighborhood.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.